



Virginia opossum

Didelphis virginiana

Kingdom: Animalia
Division/Phylum: Chordata - vertebrates
Class: Mammalia
Order: Marsupialia
Family: Didelphidae

Features

An adult Virginia opossum is 24 to 34 inches long, including a nine- to 15-inch tail. It has a pouch for the immature young to develop in after birth. It has long, coarse, gray hair, a white face, and a long, pointed, pink nose. There is dark hair near the legs. The ears are hairless. The round, hairless, prehensile tail helps with balance and climbing. An opposable toe on the hind foot also helps with climbing and grasping. The opossum is North America's only marsupial.

Natural History

The Virginia opossum lives in woodlands, stream corridors, brushy areas, and urban areas. It is an omnivore that eats vegetation (fruit, grain, and seeds), animals (insects, birds, eggs, reptiles, and worms), and scavenged material (garbage, road kills). It usually is nocturnal. A threatened opossum will play dead, hiss, or bare its teeth. The opossum has more teeth than any land mammal. This shy and secretive mammal is a good climber and swimmer. It breeds in late January and February,

with most adults breeding a second time in May. The average litter size is eight. Young are born about two weeks after the eggs are fertilized and are very immature. The average weight for a newborn opossum is 0.0056 ounce. The young move to the mother's pouch and attach to a nipple to complete development. They leave the pouch two to three months later.

Habitats

bottomland forests

Iowa Status

common; native

Iowa Range

statewide

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001.
Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats CD-ROM.